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The National Military Strategic Plan for the War on Terrorism: An Assessment

Nadav Morag

The *National Military Strategic Plan for the War on Terrorism* (hereinafter referred to as the *NMSP* or Plan), released by the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (CJCS) on February 1, 2006, sets out the Pentagon's broad strategy for executing, and presumably winning, the Global War on Terrorism (GWOT). The *NMSP* can be viewed as an elaboration of part of the larger and more holistic set of policies spelled out by the Department of Defense (DoD) in its June 2005 *Strategy for Homeland Defense and Civil Support*. The *Strategy for Homeland Defense and Civil Support* envisions a layered approach towards homeland defense and security based on a distinction between: Forward Regions, Approaches to the U.S., the U.S. Homeland and the Global Commons (space and cyberspace).¹ Although the *NMSP* does not specifically position itself within the rubric of the larger June 2005 strategy paper, its focus on attacking terrorist networks abroad, strengthening international governance and creating a global environment inhospitable to terrorists suggest that it should be viewed as a DoD articulation of the "Forward Regions" component of the overall strategy.

This article will focus on the Pentagon's "Forward Regions" strategy through analysis of the *NMSP*. The Department of Defense, of course, recognizes that combating the terrorist threat to the United States and its allies requires an approach that differs in many critical ways from the approaches needed in order to effectively carry out conventional warfare and even counterinsurgency warfare. An effective homeland security strategy, first and foremost, requires the military to "team-up" with civilian intelligence, law-enforcement, and, for specific missions, with emergency service and public health agencies as well. With the exception of the National Guard, much of the military is largely unaccustomed to this effectively unprecedented role in which the Pentagon must "share power" with civilian entities. The Department of Defense has attempted to cope with this quandary by supporting the distinction between "homeland defense" and "homeland security." A cynic might maintain that this distinction has been created in order to enable the Pentagon to retain "ownership" of a major part of the overall effort at securing the American homeland from terrorist threats and, at the same time, to enable it to play an important role under certain circumstances as the lead agency and under others as a supporting agency in domestic security and response activities. Of course, the DoD must also comply with U.S. law (which limits the military's domestic role) and, equally importantly, avoid irritating public and congressional sensibilities with respect to the power and influence, real or perceived, exercised by the military.

Potential motives aside, it is doubtful that many would argue that protecting the United States from terrorism should not require a holistic approach in which the firefighter trained to deal with a possible chemical attack in an American city and the special forces soldier trained to attack terrorist hideouts in some remote

corner of the globe are viewed as part of the same overall mission. The *National Strategy for Homeland Security* recognizes this continuum in its emphasis on prevention, reduction of vulnerability to attacks that do occur, and swift recovery from attacks.² Homeland Defense and Homeland Security should not, therefore, be viewed as different strategies, but rather different ends of a continuum that moves from the international arena, to the North American land-mass (and associated offshore areas), to the domestic arena.

Nevertheless, if we attempt to somewhat artificially separate Homeland Defense from Homeland Security, we are still confronted with a lack of clarity as to the precise role the military must play. The DoD's *Strategy for Homeland Defense and Civil Support* places the military in the lead role with respect to "defending the maritime and air approaches to the United States and protecting U.S. airspace, territorial seas, and territory from attacks."³ However, civilian agencies such as the Federal Aviation Administration and the Department of Homeland Security (via Customs and Border Protection or the U.S. Coast Guard), as well as municipal police departments and county sheriff's departments in border areas, would also be involved in responding to a terrorist attack in American airspace or across a land or maritime border. Furthermore, it is entirely conceivable, particularly with respect to terrorist attacks across land or maritime borders, that non-DoD agencies will not only be the first to respond to such attacks, but may also bring those incidents to their conclusion before the military arrives.

Ostensibly, there is one area of the overall homeland security-homeland defense continuum that lies purely within the military's purview: overseas missions. Here too, however, upon closer inspection, the picture becomes decidedly less clear-cut. Fighting terrorism abroad can be viewed primarily as a warfighting activity and, to the degree that it is such, clearly falls within the purview of a purely military activity (though reports of CIA commandoes operating during Operation Enduring Freedom in late 2001, as well as the global activities of various defense contractors, suggest that even here the military does not enjoy a complete monopoly). Fighting terrorism abroad, can also be viewed as a law-enforcement activity – as it is with respect to coping with terrorist threats emanating from the territory of America's allies (such as those in Europe) or other states operating within the rule of law as legitimate members of the international community. In this context, the military can, at best, play only a minor supporting role. Moreover, as will be discussed below, addressing the terrorist threat in a truly comprehensive manner requires focusing on efforts and delineating policies in areas in which the military has traditionally played little or no role and for which it is unclear that the military possesses or intends to build the capabilities to address these issues.

The upshot of the above argument is that the military, in trying to stake out a role in homeland security, homeland defense and overseas counter-terrorism efforts, has created what is likely to be an impossibly broad and multifaceted "operational area" requiring expertise and experience in so many different *modus operandi* and environments that the Pentagon may be placing itself in danger not only of doing a poor job in areas for which it lacks experience and expertise, but also of losing its core competency skills in the process. In looking strictly at

overseas efforts, the *NMSP* mirrors some of these problems in that it spells out a very broad mission statement, far beyond core military competencies, for coping with overseas terrorist threats.

The *NMSP* is laudable in that it shows an understanding that the terrorist threat is multifaceted and that it encompasses not only military, but political, social, economic, cultural and educational components. However, despite the sophistication of its analysis of the problem, the *NMSP* contains a number of internal contradictions and, more critically, is both unachievable and takes the initiative out of the hands of the U.S. military on the one hand, while on the other, tasks the military with a broad range of largely non-military missions. This article will focus on three central problems and suggest an alternate strategic approach and role for the military likely to be significantly more successful and allow it to fulfill a clearer role within the overall homeland security-homeland defense continuum.

PROBLEM # 1: Goals Unclear and Unrealistic

The Plan sets out the policy goal of defeating violent extremism and creating a global environment inhospitable to terrorists.⁴ While this is unquestionably a desirable goal, it is not fundamentally realistic and sets the bar too high with respect to any achievable outcomes for the GWOT. It is highly unlikely that the GWOT will succeed in defeating and/or eradicating violent extremism as a threat to the United States for the foreseeable future and even more unlikely that the global environment can be made inhospitable to violent extremists to the degree that they will be substantially curtailed. The intensity and scope of terrorism may ebb and flow over time due to a range of factors, including effective counter-terrorism policies, but a complete negation of the present Jihadist terrorist threat will, under the most optimistic scenario, take several decades at the least (by which time new terrorist threats may well have emerged).

To illustrate the tenacity of the terrorist phenomenon one need only turn to the Northern Ireland example.* The so-called “Real IRA’s” attack in Omagh in August 1998 (the single worst terrorist attack carried out in Northern Ireland since the start of the “Troubles,” the attack resulted in twenty-nine fatalities and over 300 injuries) serves as one illustration of the tenacity of the terrorist phenomenon in the face of profound and multifaceted efforts made in the political, diplomatic, and military spheres to weaken popular support for terrorist organizations and undermine the infrastructure of those organizations. Despite the ostensible “evolution” of Republican (and Unionist) groups away from terrorism and towards political dialogue, as represented by the 1998 Good Friday Agreement, and despite the findings of the Independent International Commission on Decommissioning under General Sir John de Chastelain in September 2005 that the IRA has put its weapons “beyond use,” Britain’s Security Service (MI5) was reportedly ordered in May 2006 to devote twenty

* Examples of this abound, including the FARC, the PKK, Palestinian Islamic Jihad and other groups who have been the subject of intensive counterterrorism activities and yet continue to pose a threat. Space limitations, however, preclude the provision of additional examples to further substantiate this point.

percent of its already- overstretched resources to disrupting the activities of Republican splinter groups in Northern Ireland.⁵

Consequently, while governments may adopt multifaceted approaches to dealing with the terrorist threat and may be able, over the span of several decades, to significantly impact terrorist organizations and even force some of them to abandon the “armed struggle,” there is still no guarantee that even more extreme splinter factions breaking off of those organizations will not continue to act. Moreover, as technology advances, significant acts of terrorism may be executable by increasingly smaller terrorist infrastructures and it would thus clearly be naive to assume that small groups of people wanting to do harm to the United States will no longer be a part of America’s threat environment in the future.

Since the launching of the GWOT, the State Department’s Counterterrorism Office has indeed documented a reduction in the number of casualties from global terrorist attacks from 5,806 in 2001 to 3,072 in 2002, though the number subsequently increased to 4,192 in 2003.⁶ Leaving aside questions relating to the problematic nature of the methodology used by the State Department in documenting terrorist attacks, it is nonetheless clear that there is no evidence to point to a trend towards significant decreases in terrorism. Admittedly it has been fewer than five years since the current campaign against terrorism was launched and thus it is difficult to predict its ultimate outcome (which is likely to be several decades away). Nevertheless, if the Pentagon proposes a strategy geared towards the destruction of terrorism, one would expect that it should have a fairly clear idea as to whether or not that outcome is achievable and what is patently obvious at present regarding the GWOT is that no individual today can reasonably predict the outcome of what American leaders, from the President on down, have consistently portrayed as a long war. Whether or not said terrorism constitutes a threat to the “American way of life” as well as the existence of a “free and open society” in the United States is unclear as these concepts are not clearly defined by the CJCS in the *NMSP*.

Since September 11, 2001, there has been only one documented domestic terrorist attack (against passengers at the El Al ticket counter at Los Angeles International Airport on July 4, 2002 carried out by a “lone wolf” terrorist with no known connections to al Qaeda) as well as a few interdictions of suspected terrorists. The overall paucity of attacks or attempted attacks would seem to suggest, given the presumably continued high motivation on the part of terrorists to attack the American homeland, that the threat of terrorism has substantially decreased within the United States. However, terrorism still constitutes a serious threat to American military personnel, American interests, and U.S. allies worldwide – and these may be considered, by some, to be important components in the process of maintaining the “American way of life.” It is also possible, for example, that the current “Jihad” in Iraq is acting as a lightning-rod of sorts in drawing Salafist recruits keen on killing Americans (military and civilian) in that direction, rather than towards American shores. Of course, no one can say for sure whether the war in Iraq has actually heightened security in the American homeland or potentially decreased it, due to the radicalization of larger numbers of Muslims in Iraq and elsewhere in the wake of the U.S. invasion. At any rate, an

eventual U.S. withdrawal may free up significant numbers of Salafists for future attacks on the United States itself.

Ultimately, regardless of the situation in Iraq, there are no guarantees that the American homeland will continue to be largely free of attacks and the CIA has reportedly indicated that it considers a Chemical, Biological, Radiological, Nuclear, or high-yield Explosive (CBRNE) terrorist attack within the United States to be highly probable.⁷ Additionally, with al Qaeda and its affiliates maintaining cells worldwide, increased terrorism in Europe (e.g., the Madrid and London attacks), and the strong electoral showing of Hamas in the West Bank and Gaza, extremist Shi'a factions in Iraq and the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, one can hardly deduce that the global environment has become substantially less hospitable to terrorists. It is also unclear as to what criteria the CJCS is using to define the term "inhospitable." If that term is taken to mean that terrorists the world over will suffer from a lack of popular support and be constantly and consistently hunted down by government security forces, then, as the aforementioned examples illustrate, this goal is far from being achieved.

Policy-makers in the Pentagon and elsewhere who desire to follow a realistic approach will be better served by not framing their counterterrorism policy in stark and unequivocal terms such as "defeat[ing] violent extremism" or creating an "inhospitable" global environment for terrorists. There is little logic in setting policy goals that are unattainable, however well-meaning they are. If one were to take a cynical approach and view the *NMSP* exclusively through the "Bureaucratic Politics" lens, one might conclude that the CJCS has drafted this strategy solely for the purpose of convincing Congress, the White House and the American people that the military needs to enjoy enhanced budgeting and greater political and operational freedom of action. Viewed in this context, the document makes sense because it suggests that the military can and will actually win the GWOT and that the military has the capabilities to operate in a wide range of contexts – traditional and non-traditional – thus both reinforcing the military's argument for increased funding and its argument for making the military the lead agency and centerpiece in the homeland security-homeland defense continuum. It would, however, require a highly suspicious mind to conclude that institutional and budgetary interests are, in fact, the main motivating factors behind the issuance of the *NMSP*. The DoD, like any other bureaucratic entity, is interested in strengthening its resources and its power relative to competing agencies. Yet there is no evidence to suggest that the Pentagon would risk putting forth a strategy of great significance for the country, based on Machiavellian considerations of narrow institutional interests. This would require assuming that leadership in DoD, from the Secretary of Defense on down, was highly selective in its form of patriotism as well as reckless. Moreover, such an approach would be extremely risky because if the true motivations were to come to light (and leaks have not been unheard of at the Pentagon), this would severely undermine the credibility, not only of the leadership at DoD, but of the entire military establishment. Finally, the *NMSP* itself points to the need for a partnership between the military and civilian agencies and hence, while putting the military in a central role, does not appear to promote a DoD monopolization

of the war on terrorism. It seems, at least to the author, that the strategy has to be taken at face value and judged based on the logic and realism of its approach.

The most critical problem, therefore, with taking an unrealistic approach to designing a counterterrorism policy is that real and effective efforts to *reduce* terrorism (as opposed to *defeating* it) may be undermined in the public perception because the overall goal of the policy has not been achieved. And it is clear that the phenomenon of terrorism is very much a public relations-focused phenomenon as both the terrorists and the government find themselves effectively waging a conflict for public opinion.⁸ To the degree that the public perceives itself to be reasonably safe, the government's policies will be seen as successful. Consequently, success in countering terrorism can be measured by the degree to which the public *feels* safe from terrorism. This sense of safety has important ramifications for economic activity and other parameters by which a society may be judged capable of coping with terrorism.⁹

Clearly, the public will feel completely safe if terrorism is truly eradicated, but as this is not a realistic proposition (given the fact that disgruntled persons are a constant and technology is increasingly empowering small groups of such persons) policy-makers are best advised to find the ways and means to bolster the public perception that the government is working to enhance their security rather than promising the public something it cannot deliver. For this reason, it is also highly unlikely that the *NMSP* was drafted purely as a public relations document designed to create a popular sense of safety because if that was the primary reason behind its creation, this would represent an extremely risky and fundamentally illogical public relations strategy.

From a public relations perspective, it is preferable to provide honest and accurate information to the public – even if that information is not completely reassuring – than to paint a rosy picture that proves to be completely wrong (when the almost inevitable terrorist attacks occur) and results in the military losing its credibility in the eyes of the public. Such an outcome can only serve the terrorists by driving a wedge between the authorities and the population and encouraging mass hysteria, economic crisis and, in very extreme cases, the possible breakdown of governmental control.

One final note on this point: it is clear that only a tiny minority of Americans will ever read the *NMSP*. Therefore one might argue that promises galore may be made as no one will take the Pentagon to task for failing to achieve the goals spelled out in the *NMSP*, nor will this have much of an impact on Americans' collective sense of security. While it is undoubtedly true that the great body of Americans will remain ignorant by choice regarding specific strategies for waging the GWOT and securing the homeland, one cannot comfortably assume that the perhaps five to ten percent of Americans who have a real impact on life in the United States (prominent elected officials, economic elites, key bureaucratic players, members of the news media, the rare academic, and the occasional movie star) will remain ignorant of these strategies – particularly if they fail. Moreover, while the general public may not be particularly interested in questions of strategy, they clearly do expect the military to protect America from terrorists. If the United States falls victim to a sustained campaign of terrorism, the above groups, as well as growing numbers of the general public, are likely to perceive

the military as ineffectual and this may produce a crisis of credibility that could “trickle down” to society at large.

PROBLEM # 2: Policy Implementation Primarily Dependent on Non-DoD Entities

In order to achieve the goal of defeating terrorism in the homeland and creating a global environment inhospitable to terrorism, the CJCS suggests that the Pentagon can only succeed in this mission through cooperation with other U.S. governmental agencies (presumably also with state and local agencies, though this is not explicitly clear in the language used) and with foreign governments. The DoD is accordingly authorized to work in cooperation with other American governmental entities and foreign partners to (1) thwart or defeat terrorist actions against the U.S. and its allies, (2) attack and disrupt international terrorist networks abroad, (3) deny terrorists access to Weapons of Mass Destruction, (4) assist other countries in combating terrorism and denying terrorists safe havens in their national territory, and (5) creating a global environment inhospitable to terrorism.¹⁰

Some of the above missions are unclear with respect to their scope or their intention. For example, “thwart[ing] or defeat[ing] attacks against the U.S. and its allies” suggests that the Pentagon plans to militarily intervene in a wide range of terrorist “theaters of action” including many that are not directed at the United States, but rather at its allies. This would seem to imply, therefore, that the Pentagon plans to fight groups as disparate and geographically dispersed as Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad, Hezbollah, the Tamil Tigers, Abu Sayyaf, the Real IRA, the followers of Shamil Basayev in Chechnya, and the like. As it is doubtful that the Department of Defense is really planning to “declare war” on disparate terrorist organizations worldwide, suggesting that this is United States policy is likely to mislead allies and create unrealistic expectations as to the scope of the GWOT as well as its targets. To provide just one example, it appears that Indo-Pakistani tensions, which almost led to the outbreak of war between the two nations in December 2001, were related to, on the one hand, India’s expectation that Pakistan’s support for Kashmiri separatist terrorism would put Pakistan within the camp of U.S.-defined terrorism supporters, thus bringing full U.S. support to bear behind India. On the other hand, Pakistan apparently believed that its centrality with respect to the war against the Taliban and al Qaeda meant that the United States would back Islamabad in its conflict with New Delhi.¹¹

In addition to the issue of possible ally misunderstandings, should the United States fail to subsequently engage these disparate terrorist organizations, after seemingly having declared war on them, Washington will likely be viewed by international terrorists as weak, thus strengthening the belief among al Qaeda affiliates and others that the United States is not really capable of defeating global terrorism. As matters stand now, even without the possibility that the Pentagon has unwittingly created a misleading perception as to the organizations to be targeted in the GWOT, al Qaeda has been claiming that American involvement in Afghanistan and Iraq has weakened the United States irreparably (and this when the organizations targeted by the U.S. in those countries have represented a fraction of global terrorist movements).¹² Consequently, the creation of a

perception and expectation that the U.S. will fight all terrorists without exception will simply play into the hands of terrorists who, for purposes of political prestige, recruitment and the like, are working to portray the United States as weak and the GWOT as an abject failure.

Another problematic element of the strategy has to do with the commitment, outlined in the Pentagon plan, to assist other countries in fighting terrorism and preventing their national territory from being used as a safe haven for terrorists. This represents an extremely significant commitment on the part of the U.S. military. A broad range of “failed states,” “failing states,” or otherwise weak and misgoverned states exist in Latin America and the Caribbean, Africa and Asia. Moreover, many advanced, post-industrial states – the United States included – cannot guarantee complete control over their own homeland and are unable, with any degree of certainty, to guarantee that terrorists cannot operate from their territory. Consequently, this policy implies a profound commitment in resources (economic and military) to a large number of countries. There seems little doubt that terrorists are invariably on the lookout for failed states in which they can set up an infrastructure and the United States must clearly take this fact into account, as President Bush noted in his first *National Strategy for Homeland Security*.¹³ However, building a policy around the goal of assisting states in preventing terrorists from operating in their territory is so ambitious as to be largely unrealistic. This may work to some degree in specific cases, such as with respect to the Philippines, but it is not likely to be successful on a significant scale given limited resources.¹⁴ As in the cases of Afghanistan and Iraq, the United States military has been unable to deny terrorists the use of at least some of the territory of those countries as operational safe havens. Moreover, the cost of rebuilding Afghanistan has been estimated in the billions of dollars and the U.S. may be called upon to cover some one quarter of rebuilding costs for failed states such as Sierra Leone, Angola, Congo, Somalia, and Sudan (estimated at between \$750 million and \$3.75 billion over five years).¹⁵

Two final examples will suffice to provide a sense of the daunting task of coping with the possible security threats emanating from failed states. At present, sixteen of the eighteen United Nations peacekeeping or peace-building operations worldwide take place in failed or failing states with close to 90,000 UN personnel involved in such missions. For the present fiscal year, the cost of these missions has been estimated at \$5.03 billion.¹⁶ The United Nations, moreover, is not the only agency involved in the peacekeeping business. The West African Peacekeeping Force (ECOMOG), which has been in existence since 1990, has been deployed to Liberia, Sierra Leone and Guinea-Bissau and has been instrumental in bringing at least partial stability to these failed states – yet the cost has been high. In 2001, Nigeria, the largest contributor to the force, estimated that it has spent some \$13 billion on ECOMOG since its creation.¹⁷ It should be borne in mind, furthermore, that these international peacekeeping operations fulfill a tiny fraction of the overall need for policing and stability in a wide variety of failed states, most of which can be used, in one form or another, as effective bases for global terrorism.

Adding to the extremely problematic nature of the *National Strategy* is the fact that all of the above missions for the GWOT require significant, and in many

cases, primary, efforts to be made by non-DoD entities (whether U.S. governmental agencies at the federal, state, and local levels or foreign governments). This also makes the policy largely unrealistic because it is predicated, in essence, on the full cooperation of a broad range of American and international governmental entities. Even in the highly unlikely event that this “coalition” of entities can be assembled, there is not likely to be agreement as to which agency should take the lead (not to mention which country). Moreover, if the United States feels sufficiently threatened, it is not likely to want to encumber itself with a multilateral international response. And, for that matter, the Pentagon is likely to want to maintain control of the response and not have to share decision-making authority with other federal agencies. Take Operation Enduring Freedom, the assault on the Taliban in Afghanistan in the wake of 9/11, as an example. At European urging, NATO (invoking Article V of its founding treaty) declared that an attack on the United States was an attack on all member states, yet the United States largely bypassed the alliance in favor of what was a primarily unilateral action.¹⁸

Quite a number of countries are involved in different aspects of the GWOT and each operates autonomously and with its own set of interests. Pakistan and Saudi Arabia, to name just two countries, clearly have very different objectives and interests in fighting global Jihadism; to expect both to follow American priorities and interests is simply impracticable. Moreover the problem is not just an international one. Within the United States, the GWOT (in its Homeland Security context) is “fought” overwhelmingly by law enforcement entities – most of whom are local governmental entities. A host of legal and resource issues ensure that the U.S. Northern Command plays a largely marginal role in domestic counterterrorism. Beyond this, the myriad of diplomatic, informational, economic and financial counterterrorism efforts is largely not within the purview of the military, this despite the fact that the military has, through the *NMSP*, established that its policy is predicated on success in these areas as well. Consequently, by establishing the above goals as *its* policy objective, the Pentagon is putting itself in a position of weakness because it will be unable to achieve, on its own, objectives that are essentially dependent on the goodwill and cooperation of other entities, foreign and domestic.

PROBLEM #3: Countering Ideological Support for Terrorism is Not a Feasible Goal

The *National Military Strategy* puts much emphasis on its assertion that ideological support for terrorism constitute the enemy’s “strategic center of gravity,” and that the military can help undermine such support through: (1) creating a secure environment for political moderates (presumably in countries where such moderates face intimidation in the face of support for terrorists), (2) demonstrating goodwill through humanitarian assistance, (3) strengthening military-to-military contacts in order to influence foreign leaders in their counterterrorism policies, (4) conducting operations abroad in a manner that does not offend the sensibilities of foreigners, and (5) strengthening the voices of moderates abroad through information operations.¹⁹

While the document does acknowledge that the military is not likely to be the lead agency in this area, it nevertheless sets goals, in partnership with other federal agencies, that will be difficult, if not impossible, to meet. Most students of terrorism acknowledge that in order for terrorism to be effective, it requires a minimal base of popular backing in the form of passive and active cadres of supporters or, using the systems analysis model, a series of mutually interdependent concentric rings moving from the hard-core leadership to various levels of sympathizers fulfilling a myriad of support and infrastructure functions.²⁰ It is therefore clear that terrorists will have a significantly more difficult time operating in a hostile public environment and a number of cases have shown that terrorist groups will sometimes change tactics when faced with a possible significant drop in support among traditional groups of supporters.²¹ Consequently, the goal of encouraging political moderates in countries in which terrorists derive popular support is unquestionably praiseworthy. The problem is that it is not clear how this will be accomplished and whether the Pentagon, in cooperation with or independent of other federal agencies, possesses the wherewithal to achieve this objective.

The creation of a secure environment for moderates throughout the Middle East, to take what is perhaps the most problematic region in this context as an example, requires a mind-boggling investment in resources and manpower. Among the many measures that such a policy is likely to require are: (1) the provision of significant military forces to maintain law and order in the absence of the ability and/or willingness of the host country to provide a physically safe environment for moderates (something that does not exist in Iraq today despite the current deployment of some 150,000 U.S. troops in that country), (2) the revamping of educational systems in most Middle East countries in a manner that will encourage the teaching of moderation and democratic principles and eschew time-honored religious and societal values, (3) the creation of democratic political systems that encourage political moderation and moderate debate, and (4) the creation of a significant upwardly-mobile middle class that can act as a repository of moderation and democratic values. In short, the task is daunting to say the least – so daunting in fact, as to be wholly quixotic. Moreover, such a policy would clash with the fourth policy goal: conducting foreign operations in a manner that is politically, socially, and culturally acceptable to the target populations. The deployment of significant numbers of U.S. troops in order to provide security for political moderates is not likely to endear the United States to those target populations and not likely to foster credibility for the kind of moderate and democratic values that the policy aims to encourage and solidify. Similarly, the creation of U.S.-funded, or at least U.S.-vetted, educational systems is highly likely to be seen (given the current environment of mistrust, if not outright hostility, towards the United States) as a form of American “cultural imperialism” and consequently has a very low probability of success.

The *National Strategy* also suffers from inherent contradictions in that, on the one hand, it tasks the military (albeit in cooperation with other federal agencies) with the job of creating a supportive environment for moderates in the Islamic world and yet, on the other hand, recognizes that support for moderation and the eschewing of violence and terrorism must come from the Muslim inhabitants of

these countries. The Islamic world is expected to “*progressively recognize... [that] violent extremist actions... [are]...a threat to itself through introspection*” (emphasis added).²² It is not clear whether the *National Strategy* envisions that *introspection* to come about as a result of introducing U.S. “boots on the ground” in those countries (in order to provide security to moderates and thus foster a climate of debate and introspection) or whether it will come about through active hostilities that will cause sufficient hardship to Muslims that they will realize the “error of their ways” and, through *introspection*, reach the conclusion that the path of moderation is best.

It thus appears that the “bottom line” of the CJCS’s *National Military Strategy for the War on Terrorism* is that the success of U.S. counterterrorism policy is dependent on the willingness of the Islamic world to overcome the powerful attraction of Salafist Islam. By essentially suggesting this, the Pentagon has absolved itself of ultimate responsibility for effectively fighting terrorism as the military is not likely to be a successful agent for change at the grassroots level in the Islamic world. Yet at the same time, the CJCS has set the initiation of this change, and the subsequent expected reduction in, or eradication of, terrorism as a central policy goal for the military.

LIMITING GOALS TO ACHIEVE RESULTS

The *NMSP*’s primary flaw is that it sets out policy goals that are highly impractical and ultimately largely unachievable.[†] In so doing, it will not only embolden America’s enemies when the United States invariably fails to achieve those policy goals, but also will create unrealistic expectations among allies and the American public (or at least the more prominent segments within it). The danger here is that not meeting those expectations will create a sense that the government and military are losing the war on terrorism because central policy goals set out by the military are not being met. Furthermore, due to the highly psychological nature of terrorism, if Americans become convinced that the United States is losing the war on terrorism, the United States will, in effect, have lost. Even in the case of conventional wars, public sentiment can play a crucial role (many historians point to the fact that the U.S. lost the Vietnam War in the court of public opinion and not on the battlefield). What is true for a conventional war is true even more so for the Global War on Terrorism.

[†] While one might argue that the goals set out in the *NMSP* do not have to be achieved simultaneously and therefore some of the objectives may meaningfully be addressed first and others later, a closer look at the strategy shows that progress in one area is dependent on parallel progress in other areas. The *NMSP* in fact refers to elements of the strategy being buttressed by “cross-cutting enablers” (i.e., factors that affect all of the components of the strategy). For example, attacking terrorists abroad, one of the components of the strategy, requires expanding foreign partnerships, strengthening capacity to prevent terrorist acquisition of CBRNE, and institutionalizing international strategies against terrorism – all of these being cross-cutting enablers. Consequently, the policy being proposed resembles a matrix in which forward movement requires advancement both in the components of policy and in the so-called cross-cutting enablers. This, in fact, largely precludes the option of focusing first on only a few components of the policy and then moving forward on others.

Some may argue that the DoD should purposefully set out goals that are more “aspirational” in nature – in other words, goals that one does not expect realistically to achieve, but that outline the vision and direction policy should take. It is intuitive that policymaking without vision lacks coherence and cohesion. Viewed within this rubric, the *NMSP* might not be seen as quite so problematic. However, the need for vision does not mean that all policy documents at all levels should incorporate so-called aspirational goals. In this instance, the vision for defeating global terrorism would probably best be expressed at the White House/NSC level (rather than at the level of those who are more frequently tasked with implementing policy) and when it is expressed by the president, should be clearly labeled as “aspirational,” “long term,” “visionary,” and the like, so as not to create the impression that is within the country’s immediate grasp.

Given the above, in order to develop a credible and realistic strategy for dealing with terrorism, the military should play to its strengths and comparative advantages. The military establishment’s primary role is to apply physical power in order to achieve national objectives. In this case, this means that the military focuses on the physical disruption of terrorist networks and the apprehension or liquidation of individual terrorists. The *NMSP* correctly spells out these goals and notes that they are a major part of the military’s mission, but then it goes into unfamiliar territory, for the military, by dealing with overtly non-military issues as well as ones in which the DoD subordinates itself to other domestic agencies and/or foreign countries. The American public can legitimately and realistically expect the military to be competent and effective (though not necessarily successful 100% of the time) in counterterrorist efforts within the purely military sphere. Why, then, should the Pentagon willingly embrace “mission creep” and dive head-and-shoulders into complex and muddled economic, financial, cultural, educational, etc. issues that relate to broader societies? The military is infinitely more prepared and competent to arrest or kill terrorists and destroy their bases than it is to change values, societal structures, and political regimes. It is immeasurably better to produce a successful limited policy than a failed all-encompassing one. As with any illness, it is always better to treat the root causes, but some diseases are presently incurable and the best way to manage them is by addressing their symptoms.

The Pentagon should also understand that it cannot stand aside and put the impetus for change on others – particularly societies that are not predisposed to view the United States, or Western values and culture in general, in a positive light. If the success of the military’s counterterrorism efforts is dependent on fundamental change being initiated by Muslims from within the Islamic world, then the military has willingly abrogated its control of the situation and virtually ensured that its policy (barring any sudden, dramatic democratization of the Islamic world – something which is a distinctly unlikely eventuality) will be seen as a failure. This will ultimately create serious misgivings within American society and produce the opposite of what the military is trying to achieve. Instead of strengthening America’s security (through creating a strong public *sense of security*) the military will have unwittingly contributed to undermining that security.

In sum, the *National Military Strategy for the War on Terrorism* should be just that: a *military* strategy, not a political, economic, or social one. The argument presented here does not suggest that the elements of “Soft Power” referred to in the *NMSP* (such as economic, cultural, educational, and attitudinal issues) do not need to be addressed or that they are not desirable components (allowing for the fact that some are more aspirational in nature and others more concrete) of an overarching counterterrorism policy. Rather, the author takes issue with the military taking “ownership” of this strategy because the military is far more qualified to address the elements of “Hard Power” (in this case, attacking terrorist bases overseas and the regimes that harbor them) than it is in addressing these other issues.

Whether Americans and other Westerners care to admit this or not, Jihadist terrorism is likely to be a reality for some time to come and there is probably little the United States can do to fundamentally alter the status quo in the Islamic world. The U.S. military can, however, fight terrorists in the traditional sense of the term. By setting this as its true policy goal, the Pentagon will be creating a goal that is achievable. “Fighting” does not imply always “winning,” but ultimately the American public will be more reassured when they see a limited and realistic policy pursued rather than seeing their military touting a military *cum*-political-economic-cultural-educational panacea that is highly likely to be an unmitigated failure.

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